Just a Boy, Stumbling his Way Towards Being a Man

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Just a Boy, Stumbling his Way Towards Being a Man

by Humanities_Handbag, Invader_Sam

Summary

The Galaxy's Mightiest Warrior faces a challenge he just might not overcome.

At least, not without help.

Notes

The trailer for the new Knuckles series reminded me that Humanity and I had written this ages ago, so I decided to pull it down off the shelf and share it with y'all! Because we can't get enough of the Wachowskis dealing with normal, everyday, domestic stuff that doesn't often fit into the SCU proper. ^_~

Rise and Fall of the Axe Man

For a man who, at the age of fourteen, had crashed his father's stolen truck into the town sign, all in the name of impressing a girl, Thomas Wachowski found himself woefully unprepared for his eldest son's sudden cliff dive into puberty.

He felt like he should have been more ready. He'd gone through it himself, afterall. He'd been raised by a mother who wasn't at all shy about making sure he understood the birds and the bees. He was married to a woman who was arming herself with books on the subject, and was giving him the cliff notes.

So really.

He should have been ready.

And then, on a routine trip to the hardware store to get more supplies for a weekend project his youngest was working on, a girl walked past them as they were loading up the trunk, and Knuckles left a face shaped dent in the side of the minivan.

Which was how Knuckles ended up sitting at the kitchen island, Maddie packing his nose to help stem the bleeding, and Sonic roaring with laughter from the stairs.

"I bas 'ott 'ookig bere I bas 'oig," Knuckles said, pinching his nose around the gauze currently shoved into his nostrils.

"He was looking at *something!"* Sonic screamed from the stairs, before falling into another peal of laughter.

Tom rolled his eyes. "Knuckles, it's *okay*. You can tell Mom."

"Tell Mom what?" She asked, grabbing antiseptic wipes.

Knuckles blinked. "It is… nob'ig, Mo'ber."

" *es it was!"* Shrieked Sonic before raising his voice at least ten decibels to sing, "When a girl walks in with an itty-bitty waist and a round thing up in your face-"

"*Sonic!"*

Tom's call had the boy nearly toppling down the steps in another fit of laughter.

Maddie looked to her husband, towards the hall where her son was breathless on the stairs, and towards the very red Echidna in front of her. She took a deep breath, and tried her hardest to keep any sort of laughter out of her own voice. "So…" she said, carefully, biting her tongue to keep from breaking, "you fell into our minivan, because you saw a girl?"

The call of "*ding ding ding!*" came from the stairs. Tom marched off to get his son, who very quickly scurried upstairs.

Knuckles looked away. “It is ‘rue, ‘other. I ‘as… dist’acted. It ‘wasen’ the ‘irls ‘ault.”

“Yeah, Knuckles. I know it wasn’t her fault you-” she took a deep breath, “you fell into the van.”

“I ‘ave dishono’d da fabily,” he moaned.

Maddie really was trying not to break. Especially with her eldest looking so absolutely miserable in front of her.

But that was the tipping point.

She very quickly gathered him up, shaking her head. “Honey,” she said around her laughter. “Honey, it’s *okay* . You’re allowed to like girls!”

“‘ut no’ so bany gi’ls!” He cried out.

She laughed again. “Yeah, honey. That’s fine too. You can like as many girls as you want, okay?”

“They’re *eve’ywhere!”*

“They’re not fruit flies. You’re just… noticing them more.”

Tom returned to the kitchen, Sonic sufficiently chased off for the moment. “And in his defense, she really *did* look like Sailor Venus. Blonde hair all the way down to her-”

Maddie cleared her throat at him.

“Anyway,” he coughed awkwardly, taking a seat on the opposite side of the island. “Just sayin’ I don’t blame you for rubbernecking.”

“By ‘eck is solid buscle, Fa’ber.”

“Sure it is, bud.” Tom leaned his forearms on the countertop. “Just sayin’, I get why you got distracted. First time I saw Mom I fell right off my bike.”

Knuckles looked up. “‘oo ‘id?”

“I don’t remember that,” Maddie said.

“Probably because you were clear on the other side of the quad,” Tom told her. “Didn’t actually get up the nerve to talk to you until the scrapes healed.”

“Aww.” She reached out and patted his arm.

Knuckles pulled the bloody gauze from his nose, wrinkling it. “I understand the purpose of your anecdote, Father. But I do not think the parking lot girl will find me a suitable marriage partner.”

“Oh, baby,” Maddie stroked the fur atop his head.

“Not exactly what I was saying.” Tom clasped his hands together. “Again- I dated, and just plain got distracted by, *tons* of girls before Mom.”

“Because you are the Green Hills Dallier.”

“*Nooooo*,” Tom said. “Because I was a teenage boy.”

“I did a lot of looking in my teenage years too, honey,” said Maddie, giving his hand a pat. “It’s normal. You just need a better way to process the feelings, that’s all. And maybe… not damage any property while you do it.”

He nodded slowly. “The book states that often… romance comes from compliments. Perhaps I should attempt to *communicate* with more girls. As I do with Kayla.”

“Yeah, bud!” Tom clapped his shoulder. “You were super brave then. And if they say no, you might get a friend or two out of it!”

“Your Dad’s right,” Maddie nodded. “In the meantime, maybe we can watch some movies that’ll help you out. Give you more of a platform to start with.”

“Absolutely!” Tom agreed. “Fast Times at Ridgemont High, Caddyshack, Revenge of the Nerds…”

Maddie reached across the island and pinched his arm. “Was thinking something more *romantic*, Thomas.”

“Like *what*?” he wanted to know.

“Oh, I don’t know…” Maddie shrugged. “Like… The Notebook-”

“Hate that one.”

“Why?”

“She picks the less-handsome guy.”

Maddie rolled her eyes.

As the pair of them continued to argue over the value (or lack thereof) of Ryan Gosling, Knuckles slipped off his barstool, padding away unnoticed.

Although it wasn’t ideal, Knuckles’ first official search was on the internet. They’d needed to get him a laptop for school, citing a list of rules that went along with it; namely that it would be for *research purposes only*. Then again, this felt like research when he began to look up the different romance movies on youtube.

He stayed up way past his bedtime watching The Notebook. The plot bounced around between the past and present, and the twist wasn’t hard to see coming, but it seemed a relatively standard story - boy meets girl, boy puts himself in danger to get girl’s attention,

boy fights in a war, boy finds girl again. There was more of course, like an alternative suitor, (and he agreed with Mother, that the girl ended up with the much more handsome partner), and something about money, but it all sort of became a blur because they kept showing the lead actress's bare shoulders. He missed several key plot points because of it.

Frustrated, he went looking for Father's recommendations next.

The various exploits of Earth teenagers from decades ago weren't exactly high art, and none of them had an ounce of honor, but he sat in the glow of the tiny, fragile computer, gripping the keyboard tightly.

The moment Phoebe Cates climbed out of the pool, he slammed the computer shut, plunging the room into darkness.

That was-

She'd been about to-

Father said this was worth watching??

Dishonor thrummed a frantic beat in his head, uneven, like his breathing.

And he'd thought the guilt over enjoying the transformation scenes in Sailor Moon had been bad…

It was good he'd stopped.

It wasn't as if he were *curious* about-

But then again.

If it was good to have stopped, if he *didn't* want to see-

-why did he feel like Mother's teakettle on the stove, burning hot and pressure building?

With shaking hands, he opened the laptop again.

"Sonic, would you go wake up your brother?" Maddie asked, as she pulled cereal boxes down from an upper cabinet. "If he doesn't get moving we're gonna be late for school."

The hedgehog rolled his eyes, pausing mid-way into his chair at the dining room table. "Fine. He's probably hoping we'll forget he's down there, so he won't risk walking straight into a locker."

"Take it easy on the teasing, bud," Tom said over his sandwich-making station on the island.

"S'like telling me not to breathe, Dad," Sonic quipped, but he trotted off for the basement stairs. "Yo! Knucklehead! Up and at 'em, dude!" He hit the lightswitch at the top of the stairs before venturing down. "Ugh, it smells like a locker room down here."

“What’d I say!” Tom called after him.

Maddie brushed a hand over his back as she passed behind him. “Just a brother thing.”

From the basement, they heard Sonic try again. “C’mon, man! Get up! I’m losing valuable breakfast time here! Why’d you sleep with your laptop?”

“Nothing! No one! Get out!” came the frantic voice of their eldest, followed by the distinct sound of a pillow being thrown.

“Fine! Geez! Just come upstairs, weirdo. And like, crack a window or something, dude.” Sonic reappeared in the kitchen, wrinkling his nose. “Mom, you gotta invest in one’a those diffuser things for him…”

“That’s enough out of you,” she chided, tweaking his ear as he retook his seat.

Tails looked up from his own half-finished cereal bowl. “It’s really not his fault, you know. According to Mom’s book, his glands are producing at a heightened rate and-”

“UGH don’t talk about *glands* at breakfast!”

“It’s not his fault, hon.” Maddie began to pack a few of the lunches along with Tom, wrapping each sandwich he finished in tin foil. “You’re all starting to smell a little… musky anyway.”

“Am not!” Sonic shoveled more cereal into his mouth.

“Are too,” said Tom, grabbing apples from the fridge. “And now Mom and I are starting to smell like you, too.”

Sonic glared over his bowl, drinking the milky cereal concoction. “I don’t smell like *Dad* , and he’s way worse than I am.”

“Am not,” Tom echoed.

“He doesn’t have scent glands, sweetheart.” Maddie swept past her son, dropping his lunchbox at his elbow and dipping down to press a kiss to his cheek. “Take it from a vet. And it’s a compliment. Means you’re marking us.”

“I’m not your *veterinary biology animal whatever* book, Mom.”

“Yes you are,” she sang, giving him a squeeze around his middle until he was laughing, squirming out of her grip and off the chair.

Below them, they heard the stall shower they’d installed in the basement start to run.

Tails glanced up at the wall clock. “He’s not gonna have time to eat breakfast.”

“On it.” Tom grabbed a box of pop-tarts from the pantry.

“What?? No fair,” Sonic whined. “He oversleeps so he gets junk food for breakfast?”

Maddie joined her husband at the open pantry. “He’s got a point.” She took the box out of Tom’s hand and replaced it with one of fiber bars instead. “It’ll keep him full longer anyway.”

“You’re the boss,” Tom said with an easy shrug, extracting two bars and dropping them into Knuckles’ lunch box.

The younger two were already packing backpacks and putting on shoes when the eldest emerged at last, eyes ringed and just a little bloodshot.

Tom put his backpack in his hands with a hearty, “Mornin’ Sleeping Beauty!”

Knuckles grunted, eyes on his socks.

Maddie was more sympathetic, coming up to pet the top of his head. “I’m sorry, baby. Did you have a rough night?”

His eyes widened at that and he pulled away from her touch. “What? No! My night was completely uneventful! Why would you ask such a thing! We will be late for school!” In a blur, he had his shoes on and was out the front door.

Maddie blinked. “...okay?”

“Told’ja,” Sonic said, shouldering his backpack. “Total. Weirdo.”

Knuckles had hoped against hope that school would provide a distraction from the torrent of dishonorable thoughts that had been tumbling around in his mind since last night. If he could just focus on lessons, surely the thoughts would recede to the back of his brain, where he could (maybe, possibly, hopefully) deal with them at a later date.

He knew he had hoped in vain when, in math class, the girl who sat in front of him - Shawna - bent to dig in her backpack for her book. Her shirt rose up and her jeans rode low and there was a hint of lace below the small of her back.

He swallowed, heat crawling up his neck, and turned away-

-only to get an eyeful down the shirt of the girl in the next row - Deidre - as she reached for her book as well. As he tried to wrench his eyes away, she straightened up, gave him a funny look. “You good, man?”

He whipped his head back so fast he gave himself whiplash. “Fine.”

He was not fine.

He was not fine in history class, where Robin was wearing a slouchy t-shirt that hung from one shoulder, leaving a hot pink bra strap exposed.

He was not fine in science class, where Isabella tied her thick curls up in a messy bun, leaving the back of her neck exposed.

He wasn't even fine in woodshop, where Georgia's loose-fitting overalls were suddenly bizarrely alluring. When she hefted the lathe across the room to her station, the scent glands Tails had been reading about kicked into overdrive without his permission.

Travis planted himself on the workbench roughly. "Your eyes are gonna fall out doin' that, bro."

"What?"

The seventeen year old, who had declared himself as the echidna's 'best bro' last spring, adjusted his beanie. "Ogling McAllister, dude."

"I was *not*-"

"Please." The boy shook his head, shoulder-length brown hair swaying. "You're talkin' to a professional ogler. Like recognizes like, dude. Didn't even know you were into McAllister."

"I-" Knuckles folded his arms across the workbench, chin on his arms. "I did not either."

"Say what?" Travis slid from the work surface to the swivel stool, picking up a clamp and spinning it idly.

"Nevermind." Knuckles absently reached for the half-finished birdhouse in front of him.

"Alright, whatever." Travis put down the clamp and then grabbed up his backpack, digging in the outer pockets until he extracted a small black aerosol can. "Here."

Knuckles eyed the can. "I don't understand."

Travis rolled his eyes. "Go hit the head. Mist liberally. The animal magnetism's gettin' a little strong, bro."

The echidna's muzzle paled, then flushed as bright red as the rest of him. "You- you mean you can-"

"The whole school can, man. Now go." Travis pressed the can into his friend's oversized hand. "And don't let nobody say I never did anything for ya."

He could hardly excuse himself from the room fast enough, staggering down a blessedly empty hall to an equally-blessedly empty men's room. Breathing hard, he ran a hand over his quills, horrified when a fistful came out in his glove. Groaning, he shook them off into the trash can, and then scrutinized the can Travis had given him.

ANARCHY it called itself, promising forty-eight hours of *body slamming odor into submission*.

Well that certainly sounded promising, if a little strangely-worded.

Still, anything was better than walking around with his… animal magnetism on display.

It didn't smell too bad when he sprayed it towards the sink. Better than he must have smelled anyway.

He sprayed some on his arm and sniffed.

It still wasn't bad. That mixed with the scent of Mother's laundry detergent and shampoo- it wasn't a bad combination.

So he added some more to his other arm.

And then some more to his underarms.

And then some to his legs.

And then, just in case, some to his back.

He sprayed it until the bathroom began to look hazy and he was coughing, waving it away with his hand. It was overwhelming for a moment until his nose adjusted, and then it wasn't all that bad at all.

"Anarchy," he said curiously, turning the can around a few times before dropping it into his backpack. "I am *Anarchy*."

In some ways, Travis' advice did work. It was harder to notice girls throughout the day, but that was mostly because none of them would come near him. Not even the girls who were his friends, giving him strange looks before tilting their chairs away.

"Dude," Jenna Stanton said, taking her seat beside him in English Lit, "what did you *do*?"

"I do not know what you are referring to…"

"The *smell*."

"Oh." He flushed. "I am an echidna. We produce a musk typically secreted during times of, uh, mating as well as towards those we feel protective of. It is a longstanding part of-"

"Not *that* smell," she said, waving him off. "The… stoner's basement smell."

His brow furrowed. "I do not smell of rocks."

"No, but you smell like *Travis* ." At his still-strained look, she added, "That's not a good thing, dude. He bathes in Axe."

"I bathe in water," he explained. "What you smell may be *Anarchy*."

"Whatever it is, it's *bad*." She grabbed her backpack. "I'll sit next to you tomorrow, but I don't think I can muscle through it today. Sorry."

Knuckles was very glad that he only attended school for half days, head dropping onto the desk.

Maddie was accustomed to strangeness.

For the most part, her life was normal. As normal as it could be for a mother of three alien animals. Still, they did their part to keep some normalcy intact, dragging in their own cultures and needs right along with it. It was the good fortune of being a veterinarian, and the even better fortune that their alien-ness didn't take away from the fact that their biologies were shockingly similar to the animals that they took after.

And so she felt at least partially prepared to deal with whatever came her way.

She did not, however, feel at all prepared to see her two younger sons sitting on the front steps doing their homework when she got home, bandanas tied around their faces.

"Are we doing a cowboy thing today?" She asked, stepping out of the car, grabbing the groceries she'd gotten on the way home.

Walking closer to the house, she noticed that all the windows were open.

So was the front door.

Which was… definitely strange.

Even stranger was Ozzie, who was lying on the grass, furiously wiping his front paws against his nose, chuffing and clacking his teeth.

"We're fumigating," said Tails, looking up at his mom.

"Fumigating…?"

"Because of the smell," said Sonic.

"What smell?"

Sonic tied the bandana a little tighter. "*Knucklehead* decided to stink up the whole house."

She rolled her eyes, beginning to climb the steps towards the open door. "Honestly. It's not *that* bad. Your scent glands are coming in too, you know. And I've got some stuff I'm ordering at the office to help with-*oh what the Hell!"* Maddie reeled back against the porch railing and gagged.

"Told you," said Sonic, scribbling on his math sheet.

"What *is* that?"

"Eau de Shame, I think." Sonic flipped over his sheet. "Jason didn't text to warn you? The guy practically *flew* out of here. Said something about not getting paid enough."

Maddie groaned. Knuckles' half-day tutor already had one foot out the door after that stomach-flu incident from the spring. And it wasn't like a town as small as Green Hills had many other viable options. And they'd been hoping for at least one more semester of adjusting before putting him full-day at the high school. Whatever *this* was, she was going to have to sort it out, and quick. "Did you text Dad?"

"Yup," Tails answered.

"He was thrilled," Sonic added.

She adjusted the grocery bags, which were getting heavier by the minute. "Do you *actually* know what this is? Being cryptic on purpose?"

"If I had to wager a guess," Sonic said, slowly, drawing it out for dramatic effect, "I'd say that this has Travis written all over it."

"The beanie kid?" Maddie wracked her brain, putting a face to the name. Cautiously she took another step closer to the door, sniffed. The olfactory memory came rushing back, of the beanpole of a boy who rolled up the driveway on his skateboard, ate nearly as much as Knuckles did, and called her 'Mrs. Dr. Vet Lady.' "Oh god, it *does* smell like him."

"Welcome to high school, Mom."

With a sigh, she braved going further into the house.

She turned on every ceiling fan they had, and the ventilation feature of the range hood, and then focused on getting the groceries put away before setting out to find her eldest.

The basement stairs were like a descent into the belly of the body spray beast, but she forced herself not to cover her nose. She didn't want to embarrass him.

There were voices and she paused halfway down the steps.

"You're crazy, man." Travis, slightly muffled through a speakerphone.

"I am perfectly sane." Her son, sounding weary. "Your potion of anarchy may have accomplished its stated purpose, but with the adverse effect of repelling everyone! Even my own brothers have fled the premises-"

"Your kid brothers don't know jack about any of this. Trust me. You gotta cover that shit up or you're never gonna get any."

There was a pause.

"Any what?"

"Pussy, man!"

"What do felines have to do with any of this?"

“Oh my *god*, dude! You’re *killing* me. Pussy means-”

Maddie cleared her throat as loudly as she could. “Knuckles! Baby, you down here?”

There was a scramble and the call abruptly ended.

“Y-yes, Mother!”

She waited a beat, as if she’d been at the top of the stairs, and then continued down. “Did you have the TV on? Thought I heard voices.”

“Uh. Yes.” His pupils dilated like they always did on the rare occasions he lied. “Apologies. I know homework should come first.”

“Yeah, no. No, um, no biggie.” She shook her head, working valiantly to keep her nose from wrinkling. “So listen. I know that this… *musk* thing is making you a little self-conscious-”

His pupils dilated again and he muttered, “Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Okay, fine.” She slapped the sides of her hips, chewing her bottom lip. “But here’s the thing. Whatever you got at school to cover it? It’s worse.” At his crestfallen expression, she continued on hurriedly. “I’m so sorry to be blunt. But I think I might have something to help. I just have to run back to my office real quick, okay?”

He gripped his knees, eyes on the floor, and nodded.

“Okay.” She made to move back up the stairs, hesitated, then held her breath and darted forward to kiss him lightning-quick on the forehead. “Twenty minutes. I’ll be back.”

Then she was taking the stairs two at a time, leaving him alone again.

By the time Tom got home they’d mostly aired the house out, and Maddie had returned with a gallon jug of a dog shampoo specifically formulated for scent-control and their eldest was doing homework at the kitchen table, smelling like cucumber and melon instead of musk and Axe.

“Looks like the time spent waiting in the line at Smokey Joe’s was worth it,” Tom declared as he set take-out bags on the counter. “Missed the worst of it.”

“Lucky,” Sonic said, padding in from the living room to lean against his father’s legs.

Tom reached down and scratched the boy behind the ears. “Got any appetite?”

“For Smokey Joe’s chili dogs? Uh, *yah*.”

“Good.” Tom strode to the fridge, poured himself a glass of water. “How ‘bout you, Axe Man? You hungry?”

At the table, Knuckles flinched.

Maddie smacked her husband with the towel she'd been using to dry dishes.

"Ow, what?"

She raised her eyebrows at him.

"Oh come on, it's *kinda* funny." Tom looked to Sonic. "Am I wrong?"

"You are not," the hedgehog grinned.

"See?" Tom said.

"Mother?" Knuckles was on his feet, his textbook and spiral notebook tucked under one arm. "May I be excused from dinner this evening? I don't seem to have much of an appetite."

While Tom and Sonic exchanged guilty looks, Maddie said, "If that's what you want. Of course, baby." They watched him go, and as the basement door closed, Maddie smacked Tom again with the towel.

"Hey! I'm sorry, okay?"

"Don't tell me. Tell *him*."

Tom darted a glance at the closed door.

Tails picked that moment to appear in the doorway. "Is dinner ready? I saw Dad's van from the garage- hey, where's Knuckles?"

Under Maddie's cold glare, Tom cringed. "He turned in early today. Wasn't feeling great," he told their youngest, before muttering under his breath to his wife, "I will. Later. After dinner. Promise."

"You better," she hissed before turning her attention to her other two children and getting dinner on the table.

One Time Tom Unsuccessfully Tries to Have a Father-Son Talk and One Time He Succeeds

Chapter Summary

In which Tom can't sleep.

After dinner, Tom went down to the basement, and found his eldest busy at the weight machine. “Hey bud.”

He got a grunt of acknowledgement.

“Look, I was just kiddin’ around up there. I didn’t mean anything by-”

“Understood.”

Tom clipped his jaw shut.

The machine clanked on.

“Good talk,” he said lamely.

He climbed the stairs again, went through the rest of the evening routine: read to Tails, tuck Tails in, watch TV with Maddie and Sonic, make Sonic pay the toll before bed, catch Sonic sneaking out at least three times before he was sent upstairs under threat of no dessert for a week, turn on the dishwasher, walk Ozzie, shower, scroll mindlessly on his phone while Maddie read a book, kiss Maddie, hit the lights.

The last step was elusive, however.

Instead of drifting off, he lay on his back, stared at the moonlit ceiling, and frowned.

How things had been left with his eldest sat like dead weight in his stomach. He’d been a teenage boy once, and had been embarrassed by his parents once or twice (or three or four or maybe a hundred times), and the humiliation had stung worse than the ear piercing Billy Thompson had given him behind the school dumpsters.

Thankfully, his parents’ humiliation had gotten him to take *that* little gem of a hoop out. But at the time, he’d been devastated.

His son may have been a warrior throughout the galaxy, but he was still a teenage boy who needed his parents.

Maddie was asleep, but blinked when he threw off the covers.

“T’m…?” she murmured.

He reached out to squeeze her leg. “Be back in a few.”

“K,” she grunted.

He tapped the bed again. “C’mon, Ozzie.”

A walk would be good. A walk would clear his head.

Ozzie stretched and jumped off, nails tapping against the hardwood floor.

The hallway was quiet. Through the open attic steps, he could hear Sonic murmuring in his sleep. He went past, then stopped and went back, going up for a moment to check on his two youngest. They were fast asleep, Tails’ blanket flickering from the twitch of his tails, Sonic nearly invisible in the bunk.

He sighed and climbed back down.

Ozzie followed him down the steps, nosing at Tom’s hand as he slipped on his shoes. He didn’t even bother putting on the dog’s leash, opening the front door to let Ozzie bound out. The dog vanished past the radius of their porch lights, Tom following him down the gravel, turning his phone's flashlight on.

“Alright,” he muttered, tipping his head back to look up. The moon was casting a pale blue glow against the tops of the trees filled with the hum of bullfrogs and crickets. “So tomorrow, Tom, you’re going to be less of a jerk. Yeah. Maybe actually talk to your kid.” He kicked at a rock. What would he say?

How’s that puberty going didn’t seem like a way to start.

You know, in my day, we got our puberty mail ordered! was a joke that would go over the kid’s head.

He could practically hear Maddie’s voice over his shoulder. *You can just be sincere, doofus.*

“Says you,” he muttered back. His Mind Maddie didn’t respond. Mostly because she knew she was right.

Despite the way their kids had come along, Tom could have sworn that his genes had found their way into Sonic. But at least that kid was learning how to share his feelings.

Tom was somehow still stuck in those trenches.

He sighed, whistling to Ozzie, who bounced back from down the road, tongue lolling through his proud, empty smile. “C’mon, boy,” he yawned, the anxious energy somehow clinging worse than before.

At least he could use what would no doubt be an anxiety fuelled all-nighter to plan out the perfect apology. Really craft the right words to say to his eldest kid.

“I’ve got time,” he told Ozzie, who was moving towards the back door, knowing well enough that Maddie would be fussing if he went through the front with muddy paws again. “Right, boy? I can figure this out.”

Ozzie wagged his tail again and trotted up the back steps.

Tom went after, toeing off his shoes before closing and locking the french doors. Ozzie ran in, stopping just outside of the mudroom, turning to bounce through that door instead.

“*Ozzie*,” Tom hissed. “*Ozzie, it’s bedtime. Come on, let’s*-” but he stopped when he realized that the door Ozzie had gone through was open.

And light was coming out.

Which was strange. They hadn’t done laundry for the past three days. No one had even gone into the mudroom since Sonic’s last practice two days ago, and that had only been to drop off his bags and cleats.

A shiver went up his spine, tickling at his shoulders.

He moved cautiously towards the kitchen drawer to grab the tranq gun, making sure it was loaded with a new dart. Slowly, slowly, he moved towards the mudroom door, arms raised. He’d trained for this sort of thing, of course. But it was a different story when your kids and wife were home.

He pressed his back to the wall, finger on the trigger, before finally twisting around to face the intruder head on.

Knuckles stared back at him.

“Knuckles?”

“Father!” Knuckles clutched something in his arms, which were folded as tight as he could get them. Ozzie trotted out of the room, already bored with the interaction. “Good evening! You look- very pleasant?”

“Knuckles, what-?” Tom lowered the gun. “Bud! I thought there was a *robber* .”

“No robber could get through *me*, Father,” he said. “So you should not concern yourself and go back to sleep. Right now. And perhaps stay upstairs until the sun has risen and I am no longer standing in this mudded room.”

“You okay, bud?” He set the dart gun to the side on a shelf.

“I am splendid!” Knuckles’ smile was too large for his face. “I am absolutely *splendid*, Father. And how are you this evening?”

“Honestly, Knuckles.” Tom scratched the back of his neck. “Not great. I don’t feel good about how we- how *I* left things with you.”

“Uh huh,” said Knuckles.

“I know we don’t have a lot of talks, just the two of us-”

“Mhm, mhm, mhm,” said Knuckles, tapping his foot.

“But I’m your Dad! And I think it’s important. Especially when you’re having all of these new experiences. I honestly didn’t even *know* if aliens had puberty!”

Knuckles nodded hard enough for his chin to slap his chest.

“But hey! We all learn something new, don’t we?”

“Most enlightening, Father! But I am very tired from the day’s mockery, so if I may-”

“Hold on, big guy. This is- it’s *important*. And I get it, really, because I went through that too. Maybe not in the same way, but-”

“*Please*, Father. I do not need to hear-” Knuckles began, and flung his arms out to usher Tom away. Sheets tumbled to the floor, and the boy very quickly gathered them up again.

Tom blinked.

“Are you doing laundry?”

“*No*,” Knuckles said, quickly. “I am simply… walking. In my sleep.”

“I didn’t know you sleepwalked.”

“I do. Frequently.”

“And you took off your sheets?”

Knuckles looked down at them. “I was… having a dream. About the tied of die. I must have brought them here. To tie. And kill them.”

“Right…” said Tom, giving the grinning boy a long look. “Listen, why don’t you go to bed. I’ll help you put these back on-”

“*No!”* Knuckles pulled them tighter to his chest. “You do not need to do that!”

“Your fingers are too big, bud. Mom does it all the time for you, I know. But I promise I know how to do it-”

“*No*, Thomas!”

Tom stalled, hands moving up. Knuckles hunched over in front of him, protecting the bundled sheets with his whole body.

And then it clicked.

Tom had said, just a few moments ago, that he wasn't sure if aliens and humans went through puberty in the same ways. Thinking that maybe aliens just grew flowers out of their skin or made lightning shoot out of their fingers.

Turns out, humans and aliens were pretty much the same.

In fact, Tom was pretty sure he'd had his own sheets bundled up when *his* Mom found him trying to toss them into the pig pen.

"Ah," he said, nodding. "I'm guessing that you actually were dreaming… about something else?"

Knuckles somehow went redder.

"Yup," said Tom. "Alright. Uh." He gestured towards his kid. "Why don't you just… throw those in. And I'll grab some coffee."

"May I have a grape juice, Father?"

"Sure, bud."

"May it be double, as you do on difficult nights?"

Tom was considering grabbing a type of grape juice himself, but thought against it. "Sure, bud," he said again, and turned around so his kid could prepare himself while his dad did the same. This wasn't really how he'd hoped his talk would start.

The coffee pot was percolating quietly when the boy shuffled into the kitchen. Tom had a double shot of grape juice waiting at the table. For a long moment the two of them alternated between staring at each other and *any* thing else. Then Tom cleared his throat, "Listen, bud-"

"You do not have to do this," Knuckles said to the floor. "I know you are uncomfortable with- I will just- I will figure it out on my own-"

"I've already got the coffee going." Tom pushed the chair catty corner to him out gently. "So you might as come sit down."

Knuckles wrung his bare hands together, debating.

The coffee pot pinged and Tom stood. "I'm not gonna lie, I'm not the best at this kinda thing. I mean, if you'd rather talk to Mom-"

"*No!*" Knuckles raised his head, face flushed and panic-stricken.

"I figured." Tom filled his #1 Dad mug and came back to the table. "So how 'bout you and me see if we can't muddle through this, okay?"

Haltingly, his eldest son made his way to his designated seat. He took the cup of juice in both hands, claws tapping against the glass.

“Been a rough couple of days, huh?”

“It has been *hell*,” Knuckles said, then ducked his head. “Apologies.”

“Swear jar’s closed for the night,” Tom told him. “You go ahead and say what you want.”

A flicker of relief crossed the teen’s face. He took a drink as if it were whiskey in the tumbler, setting it back down with a hard *thud*. “I *hate* this.”

“I know, bud.”

“Do you? Do you know how it feels to have your own body just… *turn against you*?”

“Actually-” Tom started, but the boy wasn’t done.

“My scent glands are so overactive I’m repulsing everyone-”

“Technically that was the Axe-”

“I cannot focus, every sliver of exposed skin draws my eye even when I do not wish it. My mind conjures…*images* that are *not* honorable. Images that now plague me even in my *sleep!* And- and- and-” His grip on the glass tightened, his teeth ground together. “My- my-” He swallowed, staring hard at the liquid in the glass, trembling. “-it unsheathed without my willing it and-*shit!*” He pushed the glass aside and buried his face in his arms.

Tom’s shoulders sagged, and he leaned forward to rub his son’s shaking back.

Knuckles flinched. “You should not touch me,” came his miserable voice from behind his arms. “I am *vile*.”

“You’re *not*,” Tom said, fighting with all his might to hold back the laugh that wanted to slip out. “You’re a sixteen year old who had a wet dream. There’s a million of ‘em on this planet.”

The echidna raised his head up just enough to turn red eyes towards his father. “There are?”

“Guarantee it. Had ‘em myself when I was your age.”

“You-”

“Yup.”

“How do I- Is there a cure?”

This time Tom did let himself laugh. “‘Fraid not, kiddo. Just gotta grow out of ‘em.”

That wasn’t the answer his son had apparently been hoping for, as he lowered his head back to the table. “So this will just… *keep* happening?”

“Not every night or anything, but yeah. Off and on for a while.”

Knuckles moaned pitifully and Tom rubbed his back again.

“It’s not really *that* bad.”

“Did you feel that way when it was happening to *you?*”

“Fair. Okay, it kinda sucks. But maybe we can help it suck a little less?”

Knuckles was silent for a long moment, and then, a soft, “How?”

“Well.” Tom sat back, picked up his untouched coffee. “Practical solution off the top of my head - we get you some boxer briefs to sleep in. Morning comes, you just put ‘em in your hamper, no midnight laundry required, no one has to know it happened.”

The echidna raised his face again, resting his chin on his arms. “That… would be preferable.”

Tom took another slow sip. “On a more, uh, preventative angle- and this is only coming from my own personal experience - but I found that, um, taking care of things while you’re *awake* tends to, uh, make the nighttime occurrences less frequent?”

Knuckles blinked, color flooding his face anew. “You mean you want me to-”

“I’m just putting it out there as an option,” Tom said, free hand raised.

“*Father.*”

“*You’re* the one with the body questions!” Tom took a long sip of coffee. “Look, all I’m saying is, it’s normal. Okay? And I know this isn’t really stuff anyone wants to talk about with their parents-”

Knuckles nodded, winding his arms around himself.

“So maybe… maybe we get you a book, if that helps.”

“I have a book. Mother-”

“Mom gave you a book about teens and bodies. She didn’t give you anything about *boys*. I think it would help, too. To have something that’s just about you. That sound good?”

Knuckles thought a moment before nodding slowly. “That would be more ideal than *this*.”

Tom grinned. “And maybe we don’t take any more advice from your friend Travis from now on. Mom told me she heard some stuff when she went down to the basement.”

“Mother said she did not!”

“Mom was being nice.” He flicked the boy’s nose. “Seems like your friend doesn’t really get how girls work all that much. They’re really not much different than you are, bud. Same sort of issues in a different way. So maybe we actually treat them like *humans* and not a goal post.”

Face still red, Knuckles looked away. “My words have… dishonored Mother. And *women*.”

“No. They haven’t. You’re learning. It’s a process. Your friend though - he’s learning in his own way. And that way isn’t really the best one. Or the right one. I don’t know what his parents are telling him or what he’s learning about girls online, but he doesn’t really seem like the type of guy who’s actually talking to women. You’ve got a better head on those shoulders than he does, and if Mom and I are doing anything when it comes to raising three *boys*, it’s making sure you use it, especially when it comes to how you treat people no matter who they are. Got it?”

“I believe I do.”

“Good.” Tom leaned forward to clap the boy on the shoulder. “Think you can get back to sleep tonight?”

Knuckles nodded. “After *this*, and last night staying up watching your films, I think I could sleep until Friday.”

Tom blanched. “What films?”

“The ones you had recommended. About the nerds and the golf course and-”

“Oh geez.” Tom scrubbed his face.

“They do not seem to align with your current philosophy, Father.”

“No. No they do not.”

“They have *very* little respect for others.”

“Yup. They were funnier when I was little. Probably would hate them now.”

“They did so many *vile* things-”

“Let’s just never mention that to Mom, okay?” Tom flicked Knuckles’ nose again. “And I’ll find some better movies for you. About all of this stuff. About how to really grow into manhood and all that.”

“Such as…”

“The Mandalorian’s a pretty good start. Learning about a guy stepping up to be a dad to an alien. Seems relevant.”

“Does he do anything vile? Like the nerds and golf men?”

“I mean, he shoots a lot of enemies with a laser.”

Knuckles seemed satisfied enough with that answer.

“I’ll think of others another day.” Tom stood and put his mug in the sink. “For now, I think we should get back to bed. You need new sheets, or do you have more downstairs?”

His son followed him to the sink. “I will need fresh ones,” he muttered.

“You got it.”

The pair of them climbed the stairs to the linen closet, Tom reaching the high shelf to pull down a clean set. “You want help with these or-”

“No. No I can- thank you, Father. I can manage.”

“Okay.”

“Father?”

“Hmm?”

“Will you- You will not- Does Mother need to-”

“Mom doesn’t need to know,” Tom said, sympathy swelling in his chest. “If you don’t want me to tell her.”

“Please.” He paused a moment. “And… you will not tell my brothers?”

“It’s between us, bud. Alright? Anything we talk about; it’ll stay between us.”

For the first time in days, the briefest glimmer of a smile crossed the echidna’s face. “Thank you.”

“Course.” He handed the sheets over, then chucked the boy’s chin. “Night, bud.”

“Goodnight, Father.”

“Love you,” Tom said to his son’s retreating form.

“And I, you.”

As Tom eased himself back into bed, gently so as not to wake Maddie (or Ozzie, who’d come back up ages ago), he marveled at how much lighter he felt. The weight in his stomach was gone, and despite his exhaustion, he felt good.

In the basement, redressing his bed in the glow of his desk lamp, Knuckles puzzled over how much of the self-loathing he’d felt upon waking was now gone. He wasn’t an aberration, as he’d thought. He was just a boy, stumbling his way towards being a man. As his father had done before him.

Perhaps there *were* worse things than being like Father after all.

Brave New World

Chapter Summary

In which progress is made.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tom overnighted the book along with a pack of boxers for his son, cutting holes in the back for his tail. He left them both on the kid's bed so no one had to see the handoff, and Knuckles came upstairs later that day giving him an appreciative smile.

And for the next few days, he did seem to be doing a little better, at least.

Tom convinced them all to watch Legally Blonde (to his wife's very audible glee) and as much as Sonic protested it at first, he got into it pretty quick, laughing until he very nearly fell over.

"The lawyer is acting with *dishonor*!" Knuckles said, watching as Elle Woods stormed away from Calihan. "How dare he use her for her appearance!"

Maddie squeezed Tom's hand. "Just a real slimy guy," she said.

"I'd punch that guy in the face for you, Mom," said Sonic.

"Thanks, honey."

"Your mom would do it first herself," Tom added.

"We can punch him together!" Her son turned towards her, smiling sweetly, draping himself across her legs. "I'd let you take the first shot! That's how much I love you!"

"And I love *you* for letting me do that." She kissed between his eyes. "Now watch the movie."

Knuckles' true test was going back to school, and he was overwhelmingly happy to find that he was doing better than he had before. Yeah, sure, heat still crawled up the back of his neck when Hannah Glaster put her hair in a messy bun, but he was polite enough to know when to look away. He was even happier when Jenna sat next to him again in math class. "Someone doesn't smell like Stoner today! Congrats!"

He grinned. "Mother gave me proper shampoo. It is cucumber and melon."

“*Much* better than Stoner.”

“I believe the correct term was *Anarchy*.”

“Believe me when I say this, dude; I think anarchy would smell better than whatever you had on.”

The real issue during the day came in the form of his self described friend in woodworking class. “Dude. I brought you these magazines my older brother had. Real vintage stuff. Just to help out.”

Knuckles shifted his chair away. “I believe I am alright without your help. I have… found assistance elsewhere. That smells a little less… pungent.”

Travis rolled his eyes. “Just haven’t found the right one for you, bro. Besides, if you ever want to land yourself some, you can’t go around acting so stuck up. Here.” He opened his backpack, and Knuckles caught a brief glimpse of what was inside. His face went hot and he very quickly scooted farther away. His movement rattled the table, and Kyle's water bottle tipped over, falling into his backpack. “Dude! What the hell!”

“Mr. Wachowski, Mr. Willings. There a problem back there?”

“ *No* ,” Travis said, too quickly, zipping up his bag full of ruined, vintage magazines.

Knuckles didn’t look at him for the rest of the class, and asked the teacher afterwards if he could switch seats.

His teacher was more than happy to comply. His new partner became the girl that Travis called him out for Ogling. Georgia Mcallister.

Turns out, she was actually very cool. Her father used to be a woodworker, and she knew a lot of different tricks and tips to help him out.

He found it was also harder to ogle when the person became a good friend.

Travis, alone at his own station, glared at Knuckles’ back for the next two days until he transferred into metal shop, at which time, Knuckles assumed his encounters with the older boy would be over.

Trouble is, with a town (and a high school) as small as Green Hills, avoiding someone isn’t the easiest thing to do.

Which was why, on Friday, on the way from English to the cafeteria with Jenna, he caught a whiff of Anarchy.

His nose led him further down the hall, Jenna trailing behind, where he found Georgia trapped against her locker, Travis keeping her pinned there with one arm either side of her body.

"*Fuck off,* Travis."

From what Knuckles knew of Georgia, she was a strong young woman. She'd told him about kickboxing classes that she'd started taking after a childhood of gymnastics. But Travis had a good foot on her, and the angle he'd trapped her in was all wrong, her arms and legs stuck beneath the placement of his spidery limbs.

Not the Warrior's way at all to engage in any sort of fight.

Though, after listening closer, it didn't seem to be a fight at all.

"Come on, Georgia," Travis' eyes were dark, trained on hers. The back of her neck was bright red, creeping up her freckled face. "It's a compliment. Thought I could take you out-"

"I said *no*."

"A week ago. People change."

"Leave me *alone*." She went to push against him, but he grabbed her wrist, holding it up against the metal over her head.

"I like *feisty,* McCallister, but this is getting old." His face was inches from hers, apparently unphased by the way she squirmed away. "The chase is only fun if you catch something at the end."

A small crowd had paused on their way to lunch, forming a little semi circle around the scene. Knuckles looked around at them; none of them seemed *happy* to be witnessing it, but nor did anyone *say* anything.

Jenna squirmed next to him. "Hey!" She called out, looking pale. "Leave her alone, Travis!"

"You want some too, Jenna?" the boy asked. Jenna looked ready to toss down her books and put her fists up, but Knuckles grabbed the back of her shirt, shaking his head. "Dude! Someone has to *stop* that creep!"

"You will get yourself in trouble if you lay a hand on him."

"So what! He doesn't *listen*."

"We will see about that." Knuckles stepped forward. "Travis. I believe Georgia said she was not interested. You may proceed along with your day."

The little semi-circle began to chitter, watching between the two, Jenna just behind, red in the face and fists tightly wound.

Travis twisted to look, but didn't release his hold of Georgia. "Get lost, freak. S'got nothin' to do with you."

Hackles rising, Knuckles frown deepened. "You accosting my friend has *everything* to do with me. Now. *Let.* ***Go.*** Before I am forced to *make* you let go."

The older boy scoffed, rolling his eyes. “Yeah right. Like you’re gonna do anything, *mama’s boy*.”

“Hey-” Jenna started.

But Knuckles kept his chin up. “My mother is a formidable woman, and I am her *best* boy. Which is the only reason I have given you so many warnings. But this is your last. Move, or you will *be* moved.” At his sides, his gloves crackled with chaos energy. “I will allow my friend Jenna to have the first swing out of mercy. Whatever comes next will be from me.”

Behind him, Jenna handed her backpack to one of the onlookers.

Travis started to roll his eyes again-

-and then Jenna kicked him in the back of the knee.

He buckled, releasing Georgia who, in turn, kneed him in the stomach. “Jerk!”

“Creep!” Jenna added.

“What the *hell?*” Travis demanded from the floor.

But no one was paying him any attention. A number of kids were pulling Georgia further away, the boy holding Jenna’s backpack handed it back with pure admiration on his face. Someone clapped Knuckles on the shoulder.

Then a teacher stepped out of a classroom and everyone hurried on to the cafeteria.

“Oh my *god*, what a *rush!*” Jenna breathed, face flushed and grinning. “Is that what it felt like to punch that giant robot?”

“I imagine it was even *more* satisfying,” Knuckles told her. Then he turned to Georgia, who was walking on his other side. “Are you alright?”

“Once I get home and wash the scuz off, yeah I’ll be good,” she said, shivering exaggeratedly. Then she looked over at Jenna. “Killer shot, by the way.”

“I know, right??” Jenna’s laugh was purely giddy.

“You should come to my kickboxing class.”

They spent the first half of lunch period on Jenna’s phone, registering her for kickboxing, and occasionally receiving fist-bumps and high-fives from kids who’d either seen the altercation, or heard the story from someone who had. Knuckles ate his lunch contentedly, enjoying listening to their conversation, feeling *normal* for the first time in a week.

When the next girl approached their table, he didn’t even notice, assuming she was coming to talk to the other two. Then she cleared her throat and Jenna nudged him with her elbow.

“Hi, Zoe,” she said, by way of introduction.

He looked up from his second sandwich.

Zoe wasn't someone he recognized, they didn't have any classes together. Petite and curvy, her dark curls were pulled back in a velvet scrunchie, and the crop top she was wearing revealed a belly button ring. He swallowed, brought his eyes back up to her face, heart-shaped, with bubblegum pink lips that were curled in a shy smile. "That was super cool. What you did," she said, sliding onto the bench directly across from him.

Jenna took a huge bite of her sandwich, watching the interaction with apt attention.

"Oh," said Knuckles. "I only did what needed to be done. Travis was behaving dishonorably, and I told him so. Jenna and Georgia took care of the rest."

"Which was amazing, by the way," Zoe said, giving the girls her attention momentarily, before turning back to Knuckles. "Anyway," she said, fiddling with a bit of paper in her hand. "I wanted to give you this." She slid it across the table. "I've seen you around. Maybe I could… see you more? If that's cool, or whatever?"

Knuckles blinked. "I… am pleased that you have two working eyes. As do I."

She laughed, face as pink as her lip gloss. "He's funny," she said to Jenna.

"Uh huh," said Jenna.

Beside her, Georgia hid a smile behind a Dorito. "A real riot."

Knuckles looked between the young women. "I am… unsure as to why superior vision is funny."

Zoe laughed again, stretching across the table to put a hand on his forearm.

He stared at it. Her nails were painted neon green. "Uh."

"So are you, like, busy this weekend, or…?"

"Uh," he said again, wrenching his eyes back to her face again. "I, uh-"

"He plays hockey Saturday afternoons," Jenna supplied helpfully. "At the rink on Route 12?"

"Sure he wouldn't mind an extra fan in the stands," Georgia added.

"Oh yeah?" Zoe kept her questions directed at him.

Jenna elbowed him again.

"Yes! I- I do. The game starts at two, and typically runs about two hours. But you don't have to-"

"That sounds fun!" she said. "Maybe we could, like, grab a bite to eat after?"

The hand she had on his arm squeezed. It was warm. "Uh."

Jenna elbowed him a third time.

“Yes! That would, um, be, uh, accepta-”

This time Jenna pinched his side.

“Enjoyable! Yes. Enjoyable. I would enjoy doing that. With you.”

Zoe smiled, biting her lip in a way that made his stomach do a cartwheel. “Okay, cool.” The hand on his arm squeezed once more and then she released him, getting up from the table. “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow, Knux.”

He watched her cross the cafeteria to rejoin her friends at their table, unable to stop his eyes from drifting lower than was honorable. Muzzle burning, he blinked, then turned to Jenna, flustered. “What, um, what just happened?”

Jenna tore a bit of crust to bits, tossing it onto the unwrapped foil. “Sounds to me like you got yourself a date, dude.”

“A date.”

“Yeah.”

“With *her?* ”

Jenna’s grin was cheshire-like. “Yeah.”

“*She* asked *me*… out on a date.”

“Is he always like this?” Georgia asked, dumping Dorito crumbs into her mouth straight from the bag.

“Nah,” Jenna said. Then the poked the echidna in the ribs again. “He’s just short-circuiting ‘cause Zoe Anderson *liiiiikes* him.”

Knuckles’ face somehow went redder. “I… do not understand why. I associated with that *harasser*.”

“Who you just tossed out like week-old fish. To help out another girl.”

“I was simply doing the job of a warrior.”

“You were being a really nice guy. And despite what *Travis* might say, people actually do like nice guys. Just not the kind he thinks he is.”

“Travis believes himself to be a kind individual? But his actions and words demonstrate the opposite!”

“Yeah, man.” Georgia said, crumpling her chip bag in her fist. “That’s kinda the point.”

“Vile,” he growled. “I am sincerely sorry he caused you discomfort.”

“Eh.” Georgia shrugged. “Some guys are just creeps. Fact of life.”

“It should not be so.”

“And *that*,” Jenna said, pointing at him with a pretzel stick, “is why Zoe Anderson’s gonna let you kiss her goodnight on Saturday.”

He blanched, then flushed deep red. “She- I- *what?*”

Georgia snickered. “Relax, dude. You don’t *have* to. But Jenna’s right. She’d probably let you.”

Knuckles put his head in his hands. “I don’t think I am prepared for this.”

“Nobody is, man.” Georgia made a perfect three-point shot with her chip bag in the nearest trash can. “Try not to freak out about it. Just go, be yourself, see what happens.”

“It’s really all you *can* do,” Jenna said, patting his shoulder. “And who knows? Maybe it’ll be fun. Zoe’s in my art class. She’s nice.”

He dared another look across the cafeteria, to where Zoe was laughing at something one of her friends was showing her on their phone. “She *is* lovely,” he murmured. “Does she have a preferred Earth flora?”

Georgia put a hand to her heart, fluttering her eyelashes. “Aww.”

“I dunno,” Jenna said. “But I’ve got art with her sixth period. I could ask. Text you what I find out.”

“That would be very helpful.”

“You’re a good wingman,” Georgia said.

“Yeah I am,” Jenna grinned.

“Nonsense,” Knuckles said, eyes still across the room. “Jenna is neither a man nor winged.”

Georgia raised an eyebrow.

“Okay,” Jenna said, “*That* he’s always like.”

That evening, Knuckles muddled through movie night, barely paying attention to the action film Sonic had chosen (insisting it was only fair after the ‘chick flick’ the previous week). Mother asked him a few times if he was alright, and he insisted - mostly truthfully - that he *was* .

Then, when Ozzie asked to go out before the movie was over and Tom stood, Knuckles stood as well. “Might I accompany you, Father?”

Tom and Maddie exchanged a glance, and then Tom shrugged. “Sure, bud.”

The trio stepped out in cool September air, and they let Ozzie lead the way down the driveway. Tom watched his eldest curiously, thumb hooked in the pocket of his jeans, as they moved leisurely onto the quiet blacktop of Plymouth Road. Once they were out of view of the house, he asked, “Something you wanted to talk about?”

“Mm.” Knuckles nodded, eyes on the road.

They passed their first neighbor.

“You gonna make me guess what it is?” Tom said, a grin bringing out his dimples. “‘Cause I could do the embarrassing-Dad routine and guess.”

Knuckles snorted a laugh. “That will not be necessary.” He took a deep breath. “There is… *someone* coming to my game tomorrow.”

“What sort of someone?”

“The sort of someone who gave me their phone number at lunch today.”

“*Really?*”

“Father.”

“Oh, no gettin’ out of *that* embarrassing-Dad routine,” Tom laughed. “Who is she?”

“Her given name is Zoe Anderson. I admit, I don’t know her well. She is a sophomore, as I am. Jenna says she is kind, and that she likes daisies.” As an afterthought, he added, “We must go tomorrow morning and acquire daisies.”

“I think we could manage that.” Tom tugged on the leash to keep Ozzie from rolling in something dead on the side of the road. “So she’s coming to the game?”

“Yes.”

“And after that?”

“I… don’t know,” the teen admitted, kicking at a fallen pinecone. “She mentioned eating?”

Tom did some math in his head. “Game ends at 4:30, time to shower and change, yeah, that puts you at the right time for an early dinner. What’s over that way? Oh, there’s the Applebee’s on Route 12, yeah that’d work.” He paused, then winced. “I’m sorry. Shouldn’t be planning your date for you.”

“I do not mind,” Knuckles said. “I don’t have the slightest inkling as to what I should be doing.”

Tom wrapped an arm around the boy’s shoulders. “God. You’ve got a *date,* bud!”

“It seems that way.”

“You don’t sound excited about it.”

“I am too nervous to be excited. What are we supposed to talk about?”

“Well, you said you don’t know her very well. I’d spend some time finding out about her. First dates are all about trading stories.”

The echidna nodded, logging that away. They paused so Ozzie could sniff something interesting. When they got moving again, he blurted, “Georgia thinks she will want me to kiss her.”

“I mean, you *are* quite a catch.”

“Father.”

“You don’t have to do anything you’re not ready for, bud,” Tom said sincerely, squeezing his son’s shoulder.

“But if I *am* ready-”

“Then you go for it,” Tom shrugged.

“But-”

“Really not seeing what the problem is here.” Tom quirked an eyebrow as Ozzie tugged them along down the road.

Knuckles growled out a string of unintelligible, possibly-alien words, wringing his hands. “Father!”

“Yeah?”

“If- If she wants me to kiss her, and if I want to kiss her, then- then I might… get excited.”

“Yeah, usually comes with the territory there.”

“No! Father!” He reached out and grabbed his father’s hand. “If- if I-” He winced as he had to say the words again. “-get *excited* , then my body might *react* in a way that is *very* difficult to conceal!”

Tom blinked. “Oh. Oh shit.”

“Yes. Oh shit, Father.”

Heat crawling up his neck, Tom blew out a breath. “Okay. Okay hang on.”

Knuckles clung to his hand like a man drowning.

Ozzie picked his next spot to sniff near an old tree stump and Tom took the opportunity to sit down. “There’s gotta be- I mean, how did the, uh, men in your tribe handle this?”

“I was a small child when they were taken, Father. I was not taught these things.”

“Right… right. Geez.” Tom wished he could scrub his face but his hands were currently occupied with a leash and his desperate eldest son. “I mean, there *had* to be a way. They were all walking around like, like you and the boys do, right?”

“Uh, n-no,” Knuckles stared off into the distance. “The older males, they had… leather tunics that they were given-” His eyes lit up, “-when they came of age!”

“Ah! See. There we go.” Tom looped Ozzie’s leash over his wrist so he could slap his knee. “Just gotta get you some date duds. We can go shopping after the florist tomorrow morning, alright?”

The teen’s face smoothed in relief. “And you think that will suffice.”

“Trust me. It’s practically what denim was invented for.” Tom squeezed his son’s hand, giving it an encouraging shake. “Problem solved. Who’s the best at this, huh?”

“I admit, I had my doubts that first night we talked,” Knuckles admitted. “But you have proven yourself a superior mentor.”

Tom laughed. “Happy you appro-” His words were knocked straight out of him as the boy caught him up in a tight hug. He returned it as best he could (with Ozzie tugging on the leash), and when his breath returned, he murmured, “Love you.”

Knuckles sighed against his chest. “I have changed my mind. You just might be worthy of Mother after all.”

Tom ducked to press a kiss to his son’s head. “C’mon. We should get back.”

When they returned to the house, the movie was over and Maddie was clearing away popcorn bowls and YooHoo boxes while Sonic and Tails brushed their teeth upstairs. “There you are,” she said as they entered the kitchen. “Have a nice walk?”

“A good talk too,” Tom told her. He unsnapped Ozzie’s leash and let the dog run up to find the other two kids, Knuckles following after. Once he was out of earshot, Tom said quietly, “I know this isn’t an easy time for him, Mads, but… it’s been good, too.”

She hummed, putting the bowls into the dishwasher. “It has been, hasn’t it.”

“Yeah.”

“Seems like you two are getting closer.” She closed the cabinets, turning around to face him. “It’s been nice to watch.”

“Been nice to be in it.”

“I’m sure.” She moved forward to wrap her arms around his neck, and he pulled her close. “He needed a father figure. Not that he didn’t have one. He just… didn’t know how to connect to it.”

“We can’t all be echidna warriors out in the forest.”

“Yeah,” she sighed. “Probably why it was harder for him, seeing you.”

“I’m not trying to replace his Father-”

“No one said you were.” She leaned back to look him in the eye. “He had one. I’m sure he was wonderful. Now he has you, and I *know* you’re wonderful. He just… needed to know that he could have two Dads. That’s all. Even if they came at different times.” She stepped back, squeezing his hands. “Grief doesn’t have an expiration date.”

“How’d I find the smartest person ever?”

“Eh, I found you. You would’ve kept stumbling around if I hadn’t.”

He laughed, leaning in to kiss her. “Need help cleaning up?”

“You wrangle Tails to bed and keep Sonic and Knuckles from fighting over the toothpaste. I’ll handle this.”

He squeezed her hand back and moved to leave, pausing in the doorway. “Oh! One more thing. Knux and I are gonna go run errands before the game tomorrow.”

“Errands?”

“Yeah. ‘Cause he - now, *don’t* squeal-”

“I don’t *squeal.”*

“-but he’s kinda sorta landed himself a date-”

Maddie squealed so loud the neighbors heard her from down the street.

“Mads.”

“I’m sorry!” She waved her hands in front of her face. “It’s just, oh my god!”

“Yeah, well, reign that in before he comes back downstairs, alright?”

She pressed her lips tight together, nodding.

She did *not* reign it in.

Thankfully Tom gave Knuckles fair warning, so he wasn’t surprised when his Mother glommed onto him, wanting to know absolutely *everything*. It wasn’t so bad, going over the

events of the day - he *was* proud how he had led the charge standing up to Travis (and Mother was *so* happy to hear they weren't friends anymore) - and he went to bed that night feeling more excited then anxious.

And that excitement carried him through a morning of shopping with Father.

They bought daisies and tried on jeans from the kids section at the little department store downtown, Knuckles spotting a few button down shirts and t-shirts that looked like what some of the kids at school wore that he shyly selected and brought to his Dad, who was more than receptive to very quickly scoop them up and bring them to checkout.

Maddie had him do an entire fashion show for her in the kitchen, agreeing that the button down and jeans were perfect for a date, and that she couldn't believe how much more grownup he looked.

"Don't even try to wrangle me into any of those," Sonic said when he went into the kitchen for a snack.

"They are pleasing to wear, Brother!" Knuckles pulled the shirt over his head and grabbed another. "They add warmth and protection!"

"What if I like being cold and vulnerable," Sonic snapped back. "Mom-"

"You don't have to wear them, honey."

"*Good*."

"Could I get a lab coat," asked Tails. "I bet that would look cool!"

"Sure thing, bud."

In the end, Sonic *did* deign to wear a hoodie to the ice rink, but no one brought up the 'like being cold' quip from earlier. Knuckles was too preoccupied with finding Zoe in the stands so he could give her the daisies before the game began, Tails was more concerned with getting a closer look at the zamboni, and Tom and Maddie were just happy they'd made it there early enough to score a good parking spot.

They wound up spotting the girl in the lobby, in line at the merch counter to buy her *self* a hoodie. "I completely spaced that it was gonna be *cold* in here!" she admitted with a laugh, as she zipped it up.

"The ice would melt otherwise," Knuckles informed her. He could feel his parents' eyes on him, even though they had *sworn* they were going to buy hot chocolate from the snack stand. "I have to, um, go to the locker room now, but I wanted to, uh-" He drew the little bouquet out from behind his back.

"Oh how pretty!" She took them from him, letting their hands touch as she did so. "That was so sweet."

His muzzle flushed and he opened his mouth, but then he heard his mother's voice over his head. "You must be Zoe! Hi!"

"*Mother.*"

"Knuckles!" Sonic fluttered a hand to his chest. "How dare you speak to Mother that way! The woman who gave you *life*-"

"Sonic," hissed Tom.

But Zoe kept right on smiling. "Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Wachowski!"

"Sorry," Tom said, taking hold of Maddie's shoulders, reaching down to grab Sonic by the back of his hoodie. "She promised she was going to be cool today-"

"I *am* cool," Maddie insisted.

"And I'm the cooler, younger brother!" Sonic grinned. "Knuckles would be lost without me."

"Did you come by yourself, honey? Would you like to sit with us?"

"*Mother!*"

"Knuckles!" Sonic chided again. "You would *dare* to take away Mom's chance at telling all the best stories about you to this *lovely* young woman you've brought here."

"*I swear to the Gods*," Knuckles whispered, giving his brother a look. "I will *end you* when this is over."

"*I'll tell her all the best stories first,*" Sonic whispered back. "*I'll write them all down and your new* girlfriend *can read them at my funeral*."

"*If you speak a word to her*-"

"Boys," Maddie said, perky voice lowering a few octaves. "Break it up." She shook her head. "Sorry about that. Zoe, did you want to…?"

"That'd be awesome, yeah!" Zoe chirped. Then, realization flickering across her face, she turned back to Knuckles. "If that's okay, I mean."

He sighed, but he too was smiling, giving Sonic an extra look for good measure. "Thankfully, I am rather fond of my family. I do not mind if you wish to observe the game with them."

"Okay, cool, yeah!"

"And I give you permission now to punch my brother, should you feel the need arise."

"Alright, well," Tom said, working to steer Maddie away from the pair. "We'll be as close to the center line as we can manage. Knock 'em dead, bud."

Knuckles waved them off. “Do not worry. No one will die this day. My brother may. But no one from the other team.”

Zoe laughed. “You’re too much.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“Totally.” She tucked the flowers into the crook of her arm so she could put a hand on his shoulder, lean down and brush her lips against his cheek. “Good luck! I’ll see you when it’s over!” Then she hurried off in the direction his parents had gone, leaving him shell-shocked in the lobby.

Slowly, he raised a hand to his cheek, muzzle twitching into a crooked smile.

His happiness was not even shattered completely when Sonic, falling in step just behind the group, stopped at the door and turned around to make kissing faces at his brother.

He could always kill his brother later.

Settled into the stands, Tom draped an arm over Maddie’s shoulders. “That could’ve gone worse.”

Maddie pinched his side, then turned to wave as Zoe climbed the stairs to their row. “I *like* her,” she whispered.

“I never would’ve guessed,” Tom whispered back. He kissed her cheek. “Try and be cool, will ya?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, I am the *epitome* of cool.”

From Tom’s other side, Sonic rolled his eyes. “You’re a mom, Mom. By definition, *not* cool.” Tom flicked his ear, and Sonic quickly pulled up his hood, pulled out his phone, and put his feet up on the back of the row below them.

“Where’d Tails go?” Tom asked.

“He was trying to talk to the zamboni driver,” Sonic said, not looking up.

“Oh, yep.” Maddie pointed down towards the ice. “Here he comes.”

The fox kit was flying up the stairs, just as another boy about his age was jogging down. They bumped against each other, and the boy reached out to catch the fox by the shoulders before he crashed. “Whoops! Sorry, dude!”

Tails went to take back off, but his eyes stayed on the boy’s retreating form, and he collided with the popcorn vender, knocking him over and sending popcorn flying all over three rows of spectators.

“Oh *geez!*” Maddie gasped.

Thumbs still flying over his phone, Sonic snickered. “Hey. Look on the bright side. At least I’m not the problem this time!”

Tom facepalmed.

Chapter End Notes

And that's the end! Thank you so much for reading and all your lovely comments!! <3 <3 <3

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